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EMPLOYMENT BUREAUS FOR WOMEN

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NO other agency stands so little for efficient service as the employment bureau. Scorned by the scientific because of its unscientific methods; condemned by the honest and conscientious because of its unjust earnings and unscrupulous policies; despised by the employer because of its failure intelligently to meet his needs; ignored by the seeker for work because of its deceptive guarantees, the employment bureau is far from commanding the respect of the industrial world. Consequently, employer and employe usually dispense with its services, and the woman who is busy molding for herself a new industrial career gives little thought to so ineffective a method for determining the direction of that career.

There is, however, in this very tantalizing condition of the employment agency that which stimulates as well as irritates. For the existence of an agency which might be a real power, rather than a mere semblance of one, creates a desire to convert the useless into the useful. The awakening of such a desire has been demonstrated by the establishment within the last few years of a number of bureaus¹ which are attempting to render the real service of which an employment bureau is capable. Moreover, several excellent studies on the subject have been published,² setting forth the inadequacy of present agencies and looking toward the development of some plan by which such

¹ The Alliance Employment Bureau, New York City; the Coöperative Employment Bureau for Women and Girls, Cleveland; Council of Jewish Women Employment Bureau, Pittsburgh; Schmidlapp Bureau for Women and Girls, Cincinnati.

² *A Handbook of Employments*, by Mrs. Ogilvie Gordon, Aberdeen: The Rosemount Press; *Report on the Desirability of Establishing an Employment Bureau in the City of New York*, by Edward T. Devine, Russell Sage Foundation; *The Chicago Employment Agent and the Immigrant Worker*, by Grace Abbott, University of Chicago Press; *Annual Reports of the Alliance Employment Bureau, Reports on Investigations*, Mary A. Van Kleeck.

agencies could be helpful in solving the problem of the unemployed.

In one of these studies Mr. Devine states that the lack of employment is due to one of three causes:

1. Unemployability because of inefficiency.
2. Lack of work.
3. Maladjustment—"The inability of people who want work to get quickly into contact with opportunities."

He further states that the employment bureau can offer no remedy for the first condition, for in that case only education and training will be effective; neither can it remedy the difficulty due to excess of supply over demand for labor. It can, however, if properly managed, help correct the maladjustment.

All the studies above mentioned agree with the opinion of a number of writers¹ dealing in detail with the question of unemployment, that the existing agencies have not met this question of maladjustment. Many commercial agencies resort to "dishonorable practices and fraudulent methods." The hunter for a job "becomes, because of his ignorance and necessities, a great temptation to an honest agent and a great opportunity to an unscrupulous one." Only a small proportion of these agencies have been found efficient, honorable, or even systematic. The work of charitable employment bureaus—those conducted under the auspices or management of philanthropic organizations—has been found extremely "fragmentary, uncoördinated and meagre," while their connection with charitable institutions has been of doubtful advantage. Trade unions also have been unable to deal effectively with their unemployed, or to attempt the formation of a systematic bureau.

Seemingly one of the simplest methods for employer and employe to find each other is the want column in the daily newspaper. But this method has proved too simple to be of more than nominal service. In the first place, careful investigation has conclusively shown that a large number of advertisements are either "fakes" or misrepresentations. The effect

¹An excellent selected bibliography on employment bureaus and unemployment is contained in the report of Mr. Devine above referred to.

upon a girl of looking up several advertisements is marked. Her wearisome efforts and wanderings are usually rewarded either by finding the place taken or misrepresented, or by meeting with inexcusable carelessness and indifference on the part of the advertiser. Hence she is convinced that there are no real or serious wants for "Help—Female." A condition of which much complaint is made is the insertion of an advertisement and then a failure to give instructions to those with whom applicants will first come into contact. Consequently, when a girl appears to inquire for the work she is often told by an uninterested stenographer that no help is wanted. It such a case recently it was only by accidentally meeting the employer on the elevator that the writer discovered that there was an open position. Another employer had advertised in the morning paper, but had left his office before nine o'clock. His secretary could give no idea of the time of his return, or of the work desired. A number of applicants, she said, had already been there, but would have to come again. This waste of time, energy and carfare could be easily prevented by a bit of foresight and consideration. The employer may reply that the irresponsible girl fails him just as often. But surely the method of unfairness on both sides will never straighten out the tangle, and the employer by nature of his position and superior breadth of view, is the one to set the example of fairness.

The free state employment bureaus which have been established in several states are described, in the inquiries above referred to, as involved in politics and hence rendering a service perfunctory and inefficient. Miss Abbott calls attention to the fact that in these bureaus "no man is working on the general problem of unemployment and bringing the entire prestige of the state and its financial expenditures to bear on its solution." Also she notes that the combination of inspection of private bureaus with the duties of the superintendent of the state employment office prevents both good inspection and good administration.

These statements concerning employment and employment agencies in general have been repeated here because they bear upon the specific problem of the woman worker whose adjust-

ment to present industrial conditions is so difficult. The difficulties of this problem may be illustrated by a brief history of the effort to meet it that is being made in Cincinnati.

In the year 1907, Mr. J. G. Schmidlapp, of Cincinnati, in memory of his daughter Charlotte, placed in the hands of The Union Savings Bank & Trust Company securities amounting to something over \$250,000, saying that he wished the income to be used for the benefit of wage-earning girls, to increase their efficiency and power of self-support. It had seemed an easy matter "to help girls" before money for that purpose was available, but with abundant funds in hand, to decide just what to do proved a hard problem. Letters poured in from young women all over the country, until the board of trustees finally decided to restrict the use of the fund to individual young women needing financial assistance to complete their education. Even after the beneficiaries were limited to Hamilton County, the task of selecting them from the applicants was no easy one.

Accordingly the trustees were asked what they intended to do about the girls to whom assistance must be refused. When they replied that for these girls the fund was not responsible, the following facts were brought to their attention: First, we cannot intelligently assist in educating young women without a more accurate knowledge of just what lines of work will be open to them when their education is completed. Second, the number of girls who come to the office of the Schmidlapp Fund for advice, for information concerning work and for employment itself, almost equals the number who wish financial assistance. Third, the applicant who applies to be made more fit in her present industrial work cannot be assisted because there is no adequate provision in Cincinnati for industrial training for girls. Fourth, it is not at all improbable that the Schmidlapp Fund will train a young woman for a certain line of employment, only to find out later that the same employment brings to the beneficiary neither health, reasonable remuneration, nor mental development. Such a mistake will be due to lack of knowledge. Fifth, a wise expenditure for training individual girls cannot be made, and a positive waste in expenditure cannot be prevented

without more definite knowledge concerning the self-supporting life of young women. The board of trustees acknowledged the seeming consistency of these statements and gave consent to a further development of these ideas.

Within a radius of a mile of the Schmidlapp Fund's office are at least a dozen centers, to some of which for more than twenty years young women have been going to look for work. One would naturally turn to these bureaus for a few simple facts regarding the industrial life of young women in Cincinnati. Perhaps they could advise the Schmidlapp Fund as to the first step to take toward educating self-supporting young women. Perhaps they could give some information concerning the occupations in which women were engaged, not only as to numbers employed but also as to remuneration, chances for advancement, effect on health, and general advantages. Because of their unusual opportunity for coming into contact with practical shop life, they might be able to state in what way girls could be trained for any special occupation. They might be able to tell why a girl had changed her occupation a half dozen times within two years, whether it was her inefficiency or the irregular, seasonal character of the work. Such information would be a guide as to whether it was best to hold the girl to ordinary school life for a longer period, or to try to overcome her inefficiency by a different course of education. These bureaus had placed hundreds of girls, and had had constant intercourse with many more. Yet not a single bureau, even the one on which the state expended \$2,500 annually, could give any definite or helpful information. There proved to be a total lack of records, of systematic knowledge concerning the applicant and the job, and even of intelligent interest in the girl's industrial career. Here was a rich opportunity wholly lost. The Schmidlapp Fund found the most reliable way to gain the desired information to be through a bureau of its own. By this time, Mr. Schmidlapp had become so keenly interested that he decided to finance such a bureau without encroaching upon the Charlotte R. Schmidlapp Fund, which could still be used for individual girls. The bank, which Mr. Schmidlapp had made trustee of the fund and of which he had been the first

president, offered to house the bureau and to allow the work to enjoy its prestige. Consequently there now appears on the door of the trust department the following sign:

The Schmidlapp Bureau for Women and Girls
Free Employment Department
Vocation Department
The Charlotte R. Schmidlapp Fund

We are beginning to attempt to do the things which ought to have been done for us twenty years ago. In the words of the annual report:

This Bureau will be based on the work of the Vocation Bureau in Boston, the Alliance Employment Bureau in New York, and on the work of Mrs. Ogilvie Gordon, of Scotland. It will have a close affiliation with all the social centers in Cincinnati, will be confined to work for women and girls, and its general scope and usefulness cannot be better formulated than in Mrs. Gordon's Handbook of Employment and in a report of the Alliance Employment Bureau :

1st. By well-planned education and congenial employment to bring as favorable influences as possible to bear upon upgrowing girls. If the first few working years of the girl can be spent industrially and to a good purpose, the parents and public may have confidence in the future of the women.

2d. To form a center of industrial information and a connecting link between school training and trade requirements, thus aiding in the development of industrial education.

3d. To make a constructive study of the facts involved in the problem of employment.

4th. To aid by counsel and information as well as by employment the girl who must be a wage earner.

Even the short experience of less than a year has demonstrated the value of such a center in Cincinnati. The carelessness, the ignorance, and the short-sightedness of parents have been brought to view over and over again in the case of girls who have been taken from school and placed in unskilled occupations where there is no chance for advancement or growth. This is sometimes due to necessity and dire poverty; but more often parents feel that a year or two more in the public school will not increase the girl's wage-earning ability, or else they can-

not discover what work the child is best fitted for, and do not know in what occupations she can at least attain some growth and promotion. This persistent withdrawal from school of girls at the age of fourteen is a cause for serious concern. We shall be guilty of criminal neglect if we longer refuse to face the situation. The already overworked teachers cannot supply the necessary guidance in other than a general way. It must be supplied by an outside agency, and as Miss Van Kleeck of the Committee on Women's Work so keenly points out, no agency for the purpose can be so helpful and efficient as one built on the needs of the individual girl.

Such a bureau will, in the first place, correct the evils and deficiencies of the present agencies. In the second place it will provide the only wise and strong foundation on which to build our educational and vocational structures for women.

To render the first service, an efficient employment bureau for women will of necessity attempt to do constructive work based on a knowledge of the evils and deficiencies which have been mentioned.

1st. Instead of no records, or inadequate ones, full and complete industrial records will be kept of both employer and employe. The one will show the conditions under which the girl does her work, and will give a careful description of the work to be done. The other will state the girl's home environment, her education or training, and her industrial history both before and after application. Both of these records will be verified by personal visits to the place of work and the home of the applicant.

2d. Instead of the selfish attitude of the commercial agency based on greed, and the perfunctory attitude of the state agency controlled by politics, there will be an attitude of fairness toward both employer and girl, based upon the sole desire to supply the need of the just employer with the ability of the responsible worker.

3d. Instead of indifference toward the relation of employer and employe, there will be an attempt, with a good chance for success, we believe, to lessen unfairness on both sides. Often a mere word of explanation, which can be given most effectively by a third party, brings consideration in place of irre-

sponsibility and injustice. Employers who complain constantly of the impossibility of securing steady workers, would be amazed at the reasons why the girls leave, as brought out in a recent inquiry based on work certificates issued to girls in 1907. Often through the unintelligent and short-sighted policy of a foreman—or, I regret to say, more often a forewoman—the employer loses a worker who proved, in another establishment, to be invaluable.

It may be of interest to note that the work we are trying thus to do in Cincinnati chanced to come to the notice of Governor Harmon and C. H. Wirmel, the commissioner of labor of Ohio. Both have evinced the greatest interest in the experiments and have asked for suggestions as to how the work of the state bureau in Cincinnati can be made more effective. Mr. Wirmel will attempt to use our system of records and in other ways to test the practicability of our methods. While, as Mr. Devine points out, a state or federal bureau can never do aggressive work, because the citizen can protest against "discrimination," public bureaus can give most valuable coöperation in the matter of records.

A number of such adjustments would go a long way toward righting the general maladjustment which so evidently exists between the supply and the demand for labor.

The second justification for the existence of these employment bureaus is unquestionably to assist in the development of industrial education—a problem which is now presenting itself in a formidable manner. That we are still far from adjusting education to woman's life is lamentably apparent. The public schools seem averse to training her for a trade lest they unadvisedly throw her into the employer's hands. The plea is still loudly heard that the girl must be trained for home life and for home life alone. If a girl goes into a trade, the school will not assume the responsibility of placing her under the deadening influences she is sure to encounter there. Hence she enters her trade untrained, with every possibility that trade experience will make her unfit for the home—not because of the nature of the occupation, but because of her own lack of intelligence concerning the occupation. While the trade itself may

not be essentially deadening, to permit a girl to be a purely mechanical worker in the trade, without an informing mind and a cultivated imagination, as Miss Addams has expressed it, leads inevitably to mental and moral stupefaction.

Not long since, a man of deep mental and spiritual insight said to the writer that he considered all legislation for making women's industrial life easier a mistake, because intolerable conditions in the factory and workshop will ultimately force women back into the home. Just where "back into the home" is, no one seems to know! With the industrial processes in which woman has worked from time immemorial taken from the home, the exhortation to stay at home and follow the example of her industrious grandmother seems a bit hard to follow. This fear, however, on the part of educators, this restiveness on the part especially of men concerning women and the trades, should not be altogether ignored, though part of it is due to plain cowardice in refusing to face things as they are. The few courageous leaders who are trying to work out an adequate system of vocational training for women feel that they need definite knowledge of the effect of industrial work upon her.¹ This can be supplied only by learning the specific needs and characteristics of the girl, the actual happenings in her working life, and the wants and demands of the employer, who, whether we like it or not, is bound to determine finally all plans for training the wage-earning girl. We can lessen his injustice and his lordship over conditions by refusing him skilled workers unless he agrees to reasonable terms; but we can never lessen his authority as to the actual work to be done and the method the worker is to pursue. Much patient study is needed. The immediate task is to bring together the employer and the educator, who for too long have walked apart when their path, which led to the making of the worker, should have been a common one.

The need for a intermediary to bring about this coöperation is clearly felt at the present time. After a recent interview dealing

¹ Besides private trade schools, interesting experiments have been made in continuation and coöoperative training in Boston, Chicago and Cincinnati. In Cincinnati, the coöoperative plan inaugurated by Dean Schneider in the university has been remarkably successful.

wholly with educational questions, Mr. Hamerschlag, Director of the Carnegie Technical Schools, said to the writer: "Do you suppose your fund would consider establishing some center or bureau that would be able to furnish really definite information concerning the occupations of girls? Don't spend your time over present education—spend it in finding out what we should do! If some one could tell us as much about trades for women as the Anti-Tuberculosis League can tell us about that disease, we might accomplish better results. We simply do not know the effect of our present legislation upon women, or whether this or that trade means health, mental development, and reasonable pay."

The employment bureau must become, it seems to me, this intermediary; it must give this help to the educator, to the employer, and above all, to the girl. It will undoubtedly demonstrate that many occupations in which women are now engaged are eminently unsuitable, failing entirely to reach the standard set by Miss Marshall that they shall "develop that kind of efficiency which will be of value to the woman as a home maker, and which will not be detrimental physically or morally."¹ By careful study authoritative knowledge must be gained of the girl's experience, and of the possibility of readjustment of methods by the employer. The few of us who have attempted such intensive work have uniformly found the employer willing to discuss such readjustment with us, because he realizes that we are honestly trying to furnish him with efficient workers and that we realize the difficulty of dealing with the individual. The industrial record of a girl covering a period of three or four years may show that she was a shiftless, inert, indifferent worker, and hence drifted from job to job. Here the distinct vocational function of the bureau must be brought into play, the girl's school record studied, and her temperament noted. She may be a "misfit" or she may need a stimulation which no amount of trade training will give, possibly a stimulation of the imagination by literature or history. If this girl could be released a few hours a week, or better, two days a week, from her employ-

¹ Florence M. Marshall: *Industrial Training for Women*, Bulletin No. 4 National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education, p. 17.

ment, without the loss of pay which she cannot afford, she might be made into a valuable worker. Many employers are not averse to considering such an experiment. The records may show, however, not a shiftless worker, but one who has been laid off because of irregular work. This girl must have training for a skilled trade which is successful enough to give full employment to efficient workers. It is apparent that the contact of the bureau with the school must be exceedingly close. Perhaps here the bureau can help prevent the waste which is now so evident in the issuing of work certificates; the waste of opportunity for information concerning the girl and her work.

We are as yet too young in the field to state positively the outcome of the experiment. It is not an easy experiment and there are many possibilities of failure. But in any case it is better to fail trying than to be idly distrustful of the possibility of good coming out of the present conditions under which woman is living. The ignorant, the foolish and the cowardly are in despair because she is becoming base and sordid through the fate laid upon her by industrial evolution. They refuse to see that if she were assisted to a sane adaptation of her life to this fate, she would become only a finer and truer type of womanhood. And perhaps, heretical though it be to say so, it may be discovered that a woman who has missed opportunity for development through wifehood and motherhood, has often been able to reach the full fruition of her womanhood through wisely chosen work. To direct girls judiciously into vocations which may be theirs not for three or five years, but for life, and which may enable them, even without marriage, to fulfil the promise which their girlhood gave of a wise, tender, courageous womanhood, is in itself no mean task. As a precedent condition, the employment-vocation bureau, must help us to discover what is the best work for women to do, and under what conditions they can do it. It will thus aid them to perform that work intelligently, efficiently, and enthusiastically. Then, and then only, will come the just remuneration, the living wage for which women at present struggle in vain.